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# Foster Critical Thinking

## The pARTnership Movement

By partnering with the arts, businesses can help employees stimulate the critical thinking needed to advance business goals.

By Aaron Dalton





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## THE BIG IDEA

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**A**rts partnerships frequently offer companies effective and cost-efficient methods of achieving critical business goals. Americans for the Arts is producing a series of essays that explore and illustrate the different types of benefits that arts partnerships can bring to your company. In this particular essay, we demonstrate how arts partnerships can help a company encourage critical thinking and thereby boost innovation among employees.

Innovation is a prerequisite for progress. To innovate means to try something different and to generate fresh ideas.

In a business context, innovation drives the discovery and development of new products, new services, and sometimes entire new industries. Innovative companies often get a head-start advantage that helps them jump ahead of the field, leaving competitors scrambling to play catch up.

So how can you improve your competitive position by making your organization more innovative? Spending more on research and development (R&D) makes sense intuitively, but the 2014 Global Innovation 1000 survey from strategic consultants Strategy&, the global strategy consulting team at PwC, showed that R&D spending alone will not necessarily make a company super innovative. The [survey identified Apple as the most innovative company in the world](#), despite the fact that Apple does not even appear on the list of the top 20 global R&D spenders.

Indeed, Apple has been leading the pack in innovation without breaking the bank for years. In 2012, news blog [Mashable](#) noted that, “Apple continues to be proof that spending more on research and development doesn’t necessarily make you more of an innovator in the technology space.”

But if you can’t purchase innovation simply by throwing money at the problem, how can you make your company more innovative? In a 2007 [article for the Howe School Alliance for Technology Management \(HSATM\)](#), David Tanner, the founding director of

“Daring ideas are like chessmen moved forward; they may be beaten, but they may start a winning game.”

*Johann Wolfgang van Goethe (1749–1832), German philosopher*

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## THE SUPPORTING DATA

# 97

PERCENT OF U.S.  
BUSINESS EXECUTIVES  
AGREE THAT CREATIVITY  
IS BECOMING MORE  
IMPORTANT IN THE  
WORKPLACE

# 85

PERCENT OF U.S.  
EXECUTIVES LOOKING TO  
HIRE CREATIVE PEOPLE  
SAY THEY CANNOT FIND  
ENOUGH QUALIFIED  
APPLICANTS

# 61

PERCENT OF U.S.  
EXECUTIVES SAY THAT  
EMPLOYERS HAVE THE  
RESPONSIBILITY TO  
INSTALL CREATIVITY IN  
THEIR WORKFORCE

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2008 Ready to Innovate report  
by The Conference Board,  
Americans for the Arts,  
and the American Association  
of School Administrators

the DuPont Center for Creativity & Innovation, asserted that *creativity* is the essential ingredient in any innovation:

**All definitions of innovation have a vital element in common. They require creative thinking! Therefore, a key challenge in building a more innovative organization is to enhance the environment for creative thinking and educate employees in creativity skills and their practical application.**

Many companies recognize the importance of creativity to their own success and would like to recruit creative employees, but it can be difficult to find enough qualified applicants with finely honed creative skills. If companies find, encourage, and foster a creative workforce, they most likely will develop this creativity themselves.

So how can companies encourage creativity among their employees in order to drive innovation?

In the book, *When Sparks Fly: Harnessing the Power of Group Creativity*, Harvard Business School professor Dorothy Leonard and psychology professor Walter Swap suggest how businesses might be able to foster creativity by encouraging “creative abrasion.”

Creative abrasion sounds a little painful, but what exactly does it mean? [Dr. Scott Wilson at Deloitte Research](#) describes the concept as “bringing together people with disparate backgrounds, cultures, thinking styles, and experiences (oftentimes conflicting), into the same group to literally *spark* the creative innovation juices and get new knowledge flowing...”

If spurring creativity is just a matter of bringing together people of different backgrounds and thinking styles, why not just encourage employees to spend more time working outside their own departments?

There’s good evidence that such an approach can in fact boost creativity while celebrating diversity and strengthening team spirit but even employees from different departments still sometimes have too many shared experiences and cultural touchstones to enable the level of intense creative abrasion needed to light the flame of innovation.

To produce the biggest creative spark, you might have to reach outside your organization even further. An external partner could push you out of your comfort zone, like the [Innovation Institute](#), a program that pairs executives with professional artists and expert facilitators to help businesspeople unleash their own creative abilities and stimulate creativity in their companies.



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## THE THEORY IN ACTION

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Innovation Institute  
participants at  
McColl Center for  
Art + Innovation

### Case #1: Teaching Creativity by Making Art

In 1998, Suzanne Fetscher became President of the McColl Center for Art + Innovation, a contemporary art center and urban artist residency program located in Charlotte, NC. “When I first relocated to Charlotte, I could not help but notice the juxtaposition of all these corporate office towers—Bank of America, Wells Fargo, and Duke Energy—within a few blocks of the center,” she recalls. “I started thinking about what kind of program we could create that would leverage our creative resources to help corporations accomplish their goals while generating revenue for us.”

Fetscher spearheaded the decision to launch an artist-led professional development program called the [Innovation Institute](#). The Institute enrolls participants—both individuals and teams—from different companies within the Charlotte metro area and beyond. During each full-day session, a professional facilitator with a background in organizational coaching and creative development joins an artist to lead participants in exercises around unlocking creativity, encouraging risk-taking, and stimulating imagi-

native thinking. The sessions begin with the artist talking about his or her work and creative process. The artists then lead the participants through a series of experiences where they are making, sharing, presenting, critiquing and discussing art. This art typically involves a wide range of mediums such as silkscreen, sculpture, painting, drawing and mixed-media.

Participants do not sit around listening to lectures. They even go beyond engaging in discussion. “This is an *experiential* program,” emphasizes Fetscher. “Innovation Institute participants *make* things during the course of the program. It’s not about the end product they create, but about helping them get reacquainted with their own internal creative processes.” More than 300 executives have graduated from the Institute’s individual development program, and more than 1,000 additional executives have participated in customized programs for teams and organizations at the Institute.

One of the artists who has served as an instructor at the Institute is Susan Harbage Page. At the Innovation Institute, Harbage Page uses various techniques to crack open the door to the creative process and push participants outside their comfort zone. For instance, she might ask the Institute participants to create a self-portrait or a portrait of another participant. Alternatively, she might use a performance art method based on the Fluxus art movement in which individual participants are given specific tasks (e.g., building a sculpture out of chairs, making a dress out of paper, standing and singing “Happy Birthday” repeatedly) so that the entire classroom becomes filled with energy and unexpected interactions among participants as each acts out his or her own roles.

“At the end of their day with me, the participants are typically in a very self-reflective place,” says Harbage Page. “We often work with people who have senior roles in their organizations. When they are faced with a problem, many of them are accustomed to finding a solution and then asking their team to execute that solution. We show them that there can be advantages to simply identifying the problem and letting the team figure it out. It feels risky to take this new approach, but if you trust your team members and give them the opportunity to work through the problem on their own, you could very well get a better answer in the end and you will find that the team is more invested in the solution.”

Harbage Page also discusses the idea of failure with the people she teaches. “Artists fail all the time!” she exclaims. “I give myself *permission* to fail. The key is to fail faster and more often, not to get stuck in failure, but to learn from failure. By having them participate in the creative process, they gain a visceral understanding of the fact that for every piece of art they see on the wall of a gallery, there are probably 40 other pieces that were failures that nobody will ever see.”

“Creativity is thinking up new things. Innovation is doing new things.”

*Theodore Levitt (1925–2006), economist, Harvard Business School professor, editor of the Harvard Business Review*



Innovation Institute participants at McColl Center for Art + Innovation

This idea of the value of failure is not unique to the art world. It was inventor and industrialist Thomas Edison who famously said, “I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.”

What about the Innovation Institute participants? How have they been changed by their experiences at the Institute? Fabi Preslar, president at [SPARK Publications](#), a design firm specializing in custom-published books, magazines, and catalogs, attended the Innovation Institute in 2007. In the months before she attended the Innovation Institute, Preslar had been feeling burnt out. She had gotten to the point where she felt incapable of coming up with new ideas—a serious handicap in a business where her clients expected her to come up with creative promotions and concepts.

“I had made some mistakes on staffing and had gotten to the point where I was so afraid of making another bad decision or taking risks that I was basically paralyzed with indecision,” recalls Preslar.

All of that changed within the first two or three sessions at the Innovation Institute. “Just to hear how these artists find inspiration in their everyday experiences helped reawaken my creativity,” says Preslar. With her new perspective, she was able to make the bold decisions needed to reinvigorate her business.

In short order, Preslar jettisoned her unproductive staff, hired talented new team members, and ended some of the frustrating client relationships that had previously sapped



Innovation Institute  
participants at  
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Art + Innovation

her creativity. Despite describing herself as a natural introvert, Preslar was inspired by her experiences at the Institute to step out and generate new business by creating her own seminar series to educate companies on the potential advantages of custom publishing. Her company's revenue jumped 118 percent in the year after her graduation from the Institute and then rose another 19 percent the following year.

Now let's consider how the Innovation Institute looks to an executive who sent his colleagues and employees through the development program and saw how it changed them.

For a decade, Bob Hambright led Centex Construction, the commercial arm of Centex Homes. (In 2007, Hambright's division was acquired by Balfour Beatty Construction from the U.K.) During the roaring real estate market of the early 2000s, Hambright's division at Centex Homes experienced rapid growth. The pace of growth did not bother Hambright one bit, but he was worried that some of his management team might have trouble keeping up.

"I looked at my executive team and saw that I had a couple of people who were doing great jobs, but struggling to keep up with the pace of growth. And if they were having trouble when we were doing \$250 million in annual volume, they were going to drown when we hit \$500 million," says Hambright. "I knew the only way to scale up our business long-term would be to scale-up our people. These were people who mostly had



## Richmond Execs Find Art Opens their Minds

In 2013, CultureWorks, a local arts agency in Richmond, VA, administered a survey to more than 270 local business executives. The survey asked whether these executives engaged in any artistic activities (e.g., writing poetry, singing in a band, painting, etc.).

According to the results of the survey, executives who participated in artistic activities felt those activities produced multiple business benefits. The executives claimed their artistic pursuits gave them positive energy, helped them to be more creative, and increased their openness to new ideas.

technical, analytical, left-brain backgrounds. I knew I had to get them to think bigger, to think about the future, and to think outside their frame of reference.”

So Hambright sent approximately half a dozen executives to the Innovation Institute. None of them wanted to go. They all grumbled that they did not have time for it. They tried to find excuses. But in the end, they went and they reaped the benefits. “Each person had a different experience, but none of them ever said it was a waste of time,” says Hambright. “To me, the Innovation Institute ended up being a good way to stretch people’s minds. I think that spending time with right-brained artists and participating in these art activities helped them appreciate people with different skills from their own. Their time at the Institute helped them appreciate the importance of creativity in finding the best business solutions.”

One of the Centex executives that Hambright sent to the Innovation Institute ended up coming back with an idea for a bold new HR model for how the company should hire, retain, and develop its people. “I give the Institute a lot of credit for creating an environment that enables the right person to create something innovative that they can take back to their company,” says Hambright. “That’s what you want to happen. You want to expose people to new ways of thinking that let them find better ways to seize opportunities or overcome challenges. And I think the Innovation Institute opens people’s minds in ways that can make that happen.”



Left: Arts/Industry artist-in-residence William Cravis working in the Pottery, 2008. Photo courtesy of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

Right: Arts/Industry artist-in-residence Kim Cridler working in the Foundry, 1999. Photo courtesy of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center.



## Case #2: Blending Art with Industry

The family-owned Kohler Co. has been making bathtubs since before most American houses had bathrooms. Today, the company is famous not only for its kitchen and bath fixtures, but for its products and services in industries as diverse as power generation, hospitality, and interior décor.

Where the Innovation Institute seeks to reawaken creativity and innovation by bringing businesspeople into an artistic setting, Kohler takes a different approach and brings art into the workplace.

In 1974, the John Michael Kohler Arts Center (JMKAC), an independent contemporary arts nonprofit organization that has since achieved national acclaim, asked Kohler Co. to partner on an unprecedented artist-in-residence program called **Arts/Industry**. Herbert (Herb) V. Kohler, Jr., who was then president of Kohler Co. and now serves as the company's Chairman, gave his agreement and Arts Center Director Ruth DeYoung Kohler invited two professional ceramists to become the first artists to work in Kohler Co.'s factory.

For more than four decades since then, the Arts/Industry residency program has been coordinated and administered by JMKAC and hosted and supported by Kohler Co. The artists who participate in Arts/Industry use Kohler Co.'s industrial equipment and



materials to produce their art—right alongside Kohler Co. associates building bathtubs, sinks, faucets, and other household fixtures.

A typical Arts/Industry artist spends two to six months working in clay, cast iron, brass, and/or enamel in the Kohler Co. Pottery, Foundry, and Enamel Shops. During their residencies, Arts/Industry artists are given round-the-clock access to studio space in the factory as well as use of factory equipment and almost unlimited basic materials. Kohler Co.'s industrial craftspeople and engineers generously provide technical information and advice to the resident artists.

Perhaps Arts/Industry has worked so well at Kohler Co. for decades because the company sees these artists as kindred spirits. Consider the origins of Kohler Co. In 1883, John Michael Kohler who was in the business of making cast iron farm implements and cemetery crosses, looked at a watering trough and realized he could add four ornamental feet to transform it into the company's first bathtub.

The bathtub sold, but according to company lore, the farmer who purchased it could only afford to barter a cow and 14 chickens as payment.

The ability to look at a watering trough and see a bathtub—that takes the eye of an innovator, the eye of an artist. And that's just the sort of creative outlook that an artist might engender working side-by-side with Kohler Co.'s employees. In *A Sense of Higher Design: The Kohlers of Kohler*, a corporate history book the firm published in 2003,

**Left: Arts/Industry artist-in-residence Dan Price in the Foundry with Kohler Co. associate "Brass" Bob Halfmann, 2013. Photo courtesy of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center.**

**Right, top: Kohler Co. Art Walk featuring Arts/Industry artist Chris Weaver's *Untitled*, 1990. Courtesy Kohler Co.**

**Right, bottom: Kohler Co. associates in front of Ann Agee's *Kohler Workers Mural*, 2013. Photo courtesy of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center.**



Left: Arts/Industry artist-in-residence Olen Hsu working in the Pottery, 2006. Photo courtesy of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

Right: Arts/Industry artist-in-residence Denise Pelletier working in the Foundry, 2001. Photo courtesy of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

Kohler Co. Chairman Herb Kohler, Jr. expressed his view that Arts/Industry contributes to the company's success by keeping Kohler Co. up-to-date on emerging artistic ideas that could play an influence on product design. He calls the "imaginative concept and design" of Kohler Co.'s products one of the primary drivers to the company's success.

The company certainly has been successful, growing to more than 30,000 associates and seeing earnings grow at a compound annual rate of over 10 percent from 1970 to 2015.

Every true arts-business partnership should have benefits for both parties, and there's no doubt that many of the artists who participate in Arts/Industry feel their experiences have been beneficial. Interviewed for an article on the Arts/Industry program in *The Wall Street Journal* ("Some Works of Art Include Everything And the Kitchen Sink" 11/24/81), participating artist Jan Axel called the Kohler Co. factory a "fantasy-land" and spoke of the willingness of Kohler Co. engineers to help her solve technical problems in the production of some tile art. Working in a factory and using industrial materials and processes forces the artists to think about big questions surrounding originality and mass production. Some of the artists have subsequently built relationships with foundries and potteries worldwide where they have worked long-term as artists-in-residence or designers.

And what does Kohler Co. get from the partnership with all these artists? There is a saying at Kohler Co. that variability is the enemy of perfection, but for an artist, variability may have positive associations with originality and uniqueness. Many of the Kohler Co. associates enjoy seeing artists take the same processes and materials that they use every day and doing something completely different and creative with them. Several associates have stated that working with the Arts/Industry residents helps them to think more creatively about their own work.

Many associates get a kick out of helping the artists find ways to push the limits of materials, processes, colors, and sizes. They visit the artists during their breaks and use their personal time to help them when they can. Many get a deep sense of pride and satisfaction from sharing their knowledge with the artists. The associates also learn from the artists, who push the limits in ways that would not make sense in factory production where processes needed to be replicable.

Kohler Co. gets one other benefit from Arts/Industry that ties back into Leonard and Swap's idea of *creative abrasion*. One of the most important things about Art/Industry is that it serves as a cultural exchange program between the factory associates and the artists. It gives Kohler Co. employees a chance to meet and work closely with people from far outside their usual circle—artists from as far afield as Korea and Australia—who share an enthusiasm for working with the same materials, in the same environment to create something beautiful. The experience of having Kohler Co. associates and artists working side-by-side not only builds a deeper acceptance for diversity, it builds real mutual understanding.

As Herb Kohler says, the company gets ideas from Arts/Industry. It gets engagement and inspiration. Perhaps Arts/Industry inspires the same sort of creativity and critical thinking that gave John Michael Kohler the ability all those years ago to look at a horse trough and see a bathtub.

“Unless you can begin with an interesting problem, it is unlikely you will end up with an interesting solution.”

*Bob Gill, illustrator and graphic designer*

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## THE TAKEAWAYS

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**W**hether you send employees to learn from artists (as at the Innovation Institute) or bring artists into the workplace (as Kohler Co. has done), either way businesses are creating myriad opportunities for the sort of ‘creative abrasion’ that illuminates new perspectives, stimulates innovation, and fosters creativity.

By observing and participating in artistic processes, businesspeople can learn that ‘failures’ are not only acceptable, they may be essential to exploring multiple possibilities and approaches before ultimately achieving a triumphant breakthrough.

By learning from professional artists, employees can perhaps recognize the artistic value in their own work and realize that building a fine bathtub is not so far removed from building a sculpture, that writing a compelling report bears some kinship to writing a novel, that art and business are in fact interlinked on many levels.

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## THE QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

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- How important is creativity to the success of your company?
- How do you measure creativity when recruiting employees? How important is creativity in your hiring decisions?
- If you do have employees with strong artistic background/skills, does their job performance or abilities differ in any way from the performance or abilities of non-artistic employees?
- How does your company track and/or reward innovation internally? Does your company have any existing programs designed to boost creativity and/or innovation?
- Are there informal or less-formal steps you could take in the short-term to expose your employees to artistic processes and thereby stimulate creative thinking? For example, how about asking a local artist whether you could visit his or her studio? Or what about contacting your local theater or dance company to see if you can sit in on a studio rehearsal?
- Innovation can lead to breakthroughs, but doing something in a new and different way inherently carries more risk than taking the tried-and-true approach. Do you penalize failure so severely that employees are discouraged from pursuing innovative

but untested solutions to business problems? If so, how can you change that mentality and encourage the sort of risk-taking that leads to major innovations?

- According to the CultureWorks survey, artistic pursuits can help executives become more energetic, creative, and open to new ideas. How could your company encourage its managers and leaders to begin or deepen their involvement in artistic activities?

Americans for the Arts is the nation's leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts in America. With more than 50 years of service, we are dedicated to representing and serving local communities and creating opportunities for every American to participate in and appreciate all forms of the arts.



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